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Exploring Open Educational Practice in an Open University

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Abstract

This paper looks at how partnership working, developed to support widening access objectives, has created opportunities for innovative initiatives involving Open Educational Resources (OER). The activity is located in Scotland, which forms one distinctive part of the increasingly differentiated UK higher education environment. Following a brief description of the types of organisations involved in partnership working, there is a brief reflection on the nature of partnership, and how policy and funding drivers in a national context shape and provide opportunities for innovative practice. Four selected case studies are provided to illustrate the development of Open Educational Practice and the paper concludes with some provisional thoughts on the distinctiveness and generalisability of these forms of practice.

Context

In 1999, following a referendum, powers over education and a range of other policy areas were devolved to the new Scottish Parliament. Scotland has historically had a different education system to the rest of the UK, but since devolution the English and Scottish systems in particular have diverged even more. The two higher education (HE) sectors remain connected in a variety of complex ways but are now almost at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum. In Scotland education is treated as a public good, while in England the system is now organised as a market, within which individuals purchase provision. Prior to devolution the Open University operated across the UK with a single curriculum, single system of student fees and single source of funding. In 2013 it operates across four highly differentiated political jurisdictions with different student fees and funding. A single curriculum is still offered across the four UK nations, with some limited local variation to accommodate different legal, educational or professional requirements.

In this new environment The Open University in Scotland (OUiS) is part of the Open University UK (OU), but is also a Scottish University by charter, and is funded by the Scottish government through the Scottish Funding Council (SFC). The OUiS is the largest provider of both part-time and distance education in Scotland. The OU has had a mission to widen access since its inception. However, distinct policy priorities and funding streams since 1999 have driven differences in approach to widening access in the different parts of the UK. In Scotland two factors have shaped and driven innovation in practice. Firstly: a funding environment where full-time HE is free, but part-time HE is funded through a combination of student fees and teaching grant

allocated to institutions by the SFC; secondly: a strong strategic push from the Scottish Government and the SFC towards collaboration, partnership and knowledge exchange. As a result OUIS has developed a web of external partnerships with third sector organisations, trade unions, employers, colleges, schools and other Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

Widening access through partnership working

Partnership working has proved to be an effective way of supporting 'non-traditional' learners into formal higher education. In these relationships the OUIS make use of mainstream curriculum delivered through the standard OU supported open learning pedagogy. This approach ensures that quality standards are maintained and, in the specific Scottish funding environment, costs to partners and their clients can be kept relatively low. However, in addition to the support given to any OU student, we also work with the partner to facilitate an environment where small cohorts of students with a shared identity can provide each other with mutual support. Partnership means recognising that each student has an identity as OU student but also an identity as employee / client etc. in relation to the partner. This enables the sharing of knowledge and experience that is local, specific and contextualised. In many examples where this peer support system has been established, success and progression rates are typically far higher than for similar students studying on an individual basis. It's important to stress that it is the collective identity generated through the students' relationship with the partner organisation that is critical.

Successful partnerships require shared commitment and objectives, and also a sense of mutual dependence (Cannell and Hewitt, 2010). As partnerships have matured, opportunities for knowledge exchange and greater understanding of the strengths and capabilities in each partner have grown. One dimension of the shared opportunities that can emerge in this dialogue is a discussion of the potential of Open Educational Resources (OER) (Atkins et al, 2007) to support transitions from informal learning to more formal and accredited learning. The OU is a world leader in OER with a wealth of resources that can be accessed through its OpenLearn website and iTunesU (McAndrew et al, 2009). Typically partners are interested in the concept of free online educational resources but initially struggle to understand how they can be made relevant in their specific context.

OER and widening access

D'Antoni in McGreal et al (2013) describes a vision of the potential of OER to open up access and reconfigure the existing boundary of educational opportunity. However, the openness of OER doesn't by itself overcome the barriers to widening access that are identified in the literature (see for example Lane, 2008). Indeed, Conole notes that,

'... the ever increasing technologically rich learning environment in which today's learners and teachers are immersed is raising issues in terms of social exclusion; the technological divide might be narrower

but it is deeper—those not connected or not using these new technologies are being left behind at an alarming rate.’ (Conole 2012: 131)

Lane in a review of higher education policy and institutional missions across Europe argues that, while initially the focus of OER was primarily on making materials available as OER as widely as possible, there is beginning to be a shift towards ‘... *acknowledgement of the proposition that OER can widen engagement or participation in HE study ...*’. (Lane, 2012: 416). OER is only free to a point, and only accessible to a point. While the medium of exchange (the internet) offers the chance to access content, it is only for those who have access to the relevant infrastructure, and this is an issue for those in the minority and the majority world (Willems and Bossu, 2012). For example, and particularly relevant in the Scottish context, research into rural ICT access has found that differential rates of access to the Internet across space and between social groups can lead to already excluded individuals becoming more excluded (Grimes 2003; Warren 2007).

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are currently dominating public discussion of open resources in the UK. These online resources allow large-scale engagement but evidence to date suggests that they are not acting as a vehicle to widen access. For example, more than seventy percent of all the students who registered on Edinburgh University’s first wave of MOOCs (offered on Coursera) already had a degree of some sort (Edinburgh University, 2013: 17).

The case studies outlined in this paper are selected from a larger group of OER developments at the OUiS. Running through all four studies is a theme of partnership working and a focus on widening access. The drivers for the initial developments were twofold: external recognition of the OU’s expertise and an expectation that this could contribute to the university’s public role; and increasingly a sense that OER were a natural way of combining partner knowledge with OU expertise to support transitions from informal to formal learning. Case study 2 is concerned with the use of OER that already existed on OpenLearn. The other three involve the creation of new resources in partnership. Initially we saw the developments that are illustrated in the case studies as a set of interesting but discrete partnership projects. Through a process of rigorous evaluation and theorisation we have begun to see this work as part of a distinctive form of Open Educational Practice (OEP) (Conole, 2010). From first tentative steps, the use of OER to foster life long learning, through supporting journeys from informal to formal learning, has become a key strategic objective (OUiS, 2013).

Case studies

Case Study One: Gaelic in Modern Scotland

Just under two percent of the Scottish population are Gaelic Speakers. Bòrd na Gàidhlig¹ were asked by the Scottish Government to produce a national plan for Gaelic (Bòrd na Gàidhlig 2007), one of the key areas identified was a need to raise awareness of the Gaelic language across Scotland.

After discussion between the OUiS and the Bòrd a proposal was formulated to develop an OER on Gaelic culture. Both partners wanted to ensure that the materials were as open and accessible as possible for people to study, and for people to reuse and update. The OU in Scotland consulted with other providers to ensure that what it was proposing did not overlap with existing provision. Here the OU in Scotland's expertise in developing self-supported materials for distributed learners and the strength of its OpenLearn platform were key. The OU's reputation for excellent content and robust systems meant that the partner was confident that the OU could deliver. Confidence is also crucial for learners, they need to know that the OER is good quality and from a trusted source.

The Bòrd worked with the OU in Scotland to set up a team comprised of Gaelic experts, many of them academics from other institutions, to develop a suite of learning materials entitled 'Gaelic in Modern Scotland'². The project began in 2010 and took 11 months to complete. It was funded directly by the OU. Since the site was launched in 2011 it has been viewed nearly 40,000 times, with many of these viewers coming from outside Scotland and outside the UK. Gaelic media and broadcasting services now link directly the materials, while the multi-agency LearnGaelic portal has uploaded (reused) the materials on its site. More recently Education Scotland are looking at promoting the materials through their portal and encouraging teachers to remix and update the materials on Labspace.

Case Study Two: IT Skills for the Food and Drink Industry

The OUiS has had a long-term partnership with the Scottish Trades Union Congress and its learning arm Scottish Union Learning. One of the affiliated unions, the GMB, has a large number of members in the food and drinks industry. Typically these workers are relatively low paid and often have little or no further or higher education experience. However, the food and drink industry is becoming increasingly technical, from the office to the production line, from high-level supply chain management to the everyday logistics, workers are being asked to engage at all levels with new and emerging technologies. Developing and maintaining confidence, knowledge and skills within this dynamic environment is key to staff remaining and progressing within the sector. Working with the GMB, the OUiS developed a plan to support groups of workers in their workplaces to develop skills and confidence

¹ Bòrd na Gàidhlig is an organisation which works to promote and improve the status of the Gaelic Language in Scotland.

² <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/languages/more-languages/gaelic-modern-scotland/content-section-0>

in using IT. The project was funded through a successful tender to Scottish Union Learning for funding provided by the Scottish Government and the European Social Fund.

The 'course' was structured round a series of face-to-face workshops delivered in the workplace. The content was designed around the needs of prospective students (MacAdam et al, undated). We discovered that issues around engagement with technologies were about more than simply knowing how to work it or how it works. It was about understanding technologies in context and often dealt with some complex issues around the role of technology within society. This meant that the OU's accredited pathways were possibly too detailed on some aspects (not enough on others), and a training approach was not suitable either. Tutors, delivering face to face in the workplace had clear objectives and a set of learning outcomes backed up by a suite of learning materials mainly OER derived from existing accredited modules and available on OpenLearn. Tutor facilitation developed local context and focused on specific needs while the OER provided a basis for activity and discussion in the workshops. Moreover, the use of OER meant that the learners could return to the material again later to revise or reinforce learning outcomes.

Case Study Three: Community Energy Scotland

Community Energy Scotland is a third sector organisation that receives funding from, and distributes funding on behalf of, the Scottish Governments. Its role is to support the community energy sector in Scotland. The OUiS began talking to CES in late 2011. CES has a rich knowledge and experience of the community energy sector, but its learning materials and approach was fragmented. CES were interested in our expertise in developing and managing distributed learning, our Virtual Learning Environment, and our learning materials. We worked with CES to develop an OER unit on Labspace³.

The unit was designed to support 'facilities projects'; that is smaller scale community projects that are looking to improve the energy performance of their building or install new energy generation equipment. The unit uses existing OU content, existing CES content, and bespoke materials. Unlike many OER or ODL materials, the units are focused on delivering tangible outcomes. This meant a different pedagogical model, it needed to be about more than simply telling; it needed to demonstrate clearly how to place the knowledge and skills in context. Effectively this is 'enquiry based learning' (Scanlon 2012); where learning is structured around questions, and in this case shared with peers. It was decided that the unit would be structured round a series of case studies, these idealised visions of a community group were developed by CES project officers and we then 'tested' our approach and the materials on and against those imagined communities. Once tested the materials were written around the case studies. The materials are being

³ <http://labspace.open.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=8162>

piloted by community groups; it is too early to say how well used they will be, and success needs to be measured in the long term as community projects can take up to 2 years.

Case Study Four: Reflection toolkit

The demand for this resource came from Third Sector Partners who work with the OUiS to help clients make transitions into more formal study, or into work. It brings together the contextual and practice knowledge of the partners and the OU's expertise in reflective learning and learning design. The toolkit was developed to aid the process of reflection for learners from diverse backgrounds. It aims to get people to start thinking about themselves, who they are, what they want to do in their present situation and how they can work towards achieving their ambitions.

A second bespoke version of the Reflection Toolkit was developed in partnership with Bridges Programmes, a specialist agency that helps refugees, asylum seekers, third country nationals and anyone for whom English is a second language. Bridges, based in Glasgow supports its clients to gain meaningful work experience within their field of expertise. The OUiS has had a long partnership with Bridges sharing staff and developing routes into formal learning.

Third Sector Organisations, Colleges and Unions from the network of OUiS partners are now using both versions of the toolkit.

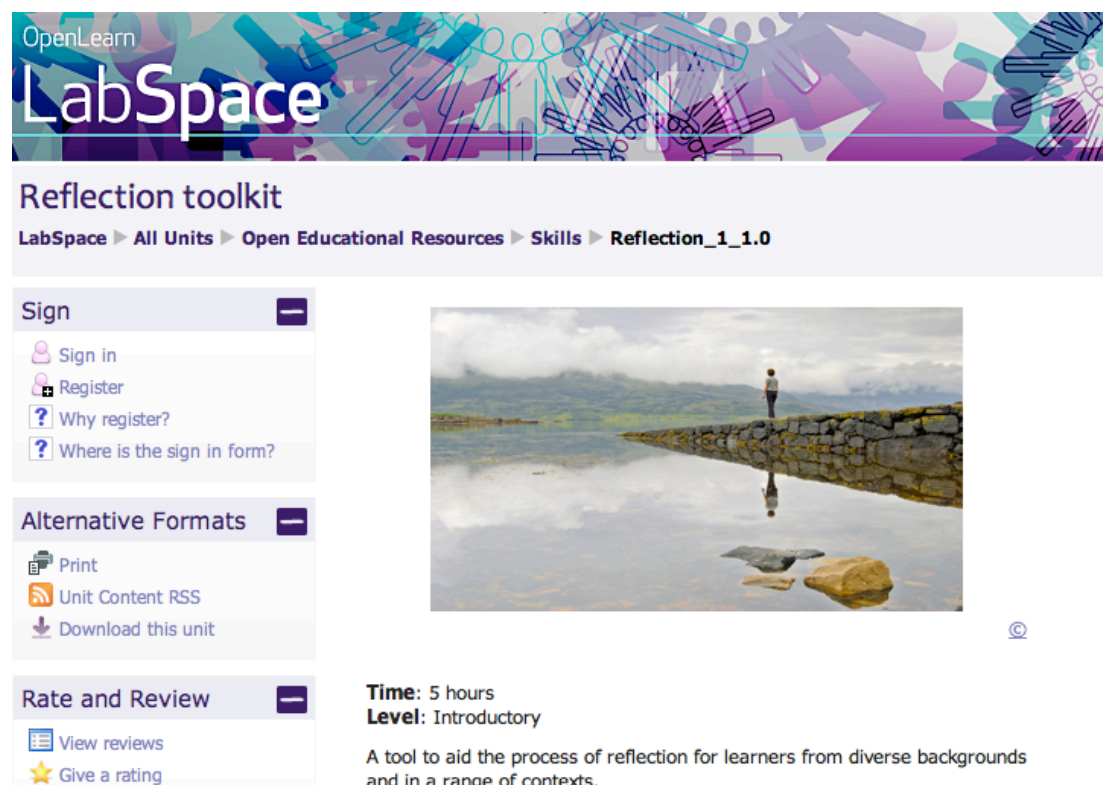


Fig 1: Screenshot of toolkit title page

Conclusion

Conole (2010) suggests that Open Educational Practices (OEP) '*are a set of activities and support around the creation, use and repurposing of Open Educational Resources (OER)*.' As we have accumulated more and more examples of the use of existing OER and the creation of new OER in partnership in the OUiS we have begun to describe the collection of initiatives as OEP. The evidence we have accumulated over a series of projects supports D'Antoni's contention (in an editorial for a special edition of Open Learning) that '*communities and networking*' are critically important for developing the OER movement (D'Antoni, 2009: 7).

The OUiS operates in an environment where there are strong political and policy drivers for partnership and some limited funding to support partnership development. This contrasts with the competitive HE environment in Australia described by Bossu et al (2012) and it's interesting that they conjecture that it is precisely this that has helped back the development of OER in a widening access context. We are also able to bring together the expertise and trusted brand of the OU with a diverse national network of partner organisations with an interest in widening access. Despite the specificity of our experience, however, we feel that there are elements of our experience that may be generalisable. A conception of OEP that engages partners in development and design and then again in delivery and dissemination affords opportunities to widen access and shift traditional boundaries between HEIs and other agencies.

OER has a huge potential to destabilise the typical pedagogical relationships that have developed within the HE sector. Increasingly we are breaking with a model in which HE providers develop and manage knowledge and release it to select people, normally in particular places at particular times. What our selected case studies and other examples of our practice suggest is that development in partnership then creates opportunities for use at scale. The initial partnership(s) is a catalyst but in the examples where we create new OER in partnership usage spreads far beyond our own existing network. So partnerships that have elements of local and bespoke have the capacity to enable use at scale provided the embedded learning design is robust.

The food and drink case study represented the first of a burgeoning set of initiatives located in the workplace and initiated sometimes with a union and sometimes in a tripartite relationship with union, employer and university. We find that working through Trade Unions (which are national organisations with networks of learning representatives in many workplaces) allows us to achieve the scale that the OU requires to deliver cost effectively. The benefit for us is that we generate income and build relationships with employers and with students. The risk is that we simply become another means of employers ensuring their employees are "skilled enough". For us as an organisation we need to take care that we do not end up using OER to reproduce educational inequities, being skilled enough should not be enough for us. Our strategic aims are to breakdown barriers to learning and create pathways between informal and formal study to open up opportunities for 'non-traditional' students.

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